

Chapter V - Lettres écrites de Lausanne: 'Histoire de Cécile'



The Novels of Isabelle de Charrière

by

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In the Introduction to his edition of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* Philippe Godet gives an extract from a letter unknown to him when he published his biography of Isabelle de Charrière. The letter, written in about 1800 to a Dutch correspondent, reveals that the first section of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* was composed in 1785:

Un an après que l'on eut imprimé les *Lettres neuchâtelaises*, un proposant du Pays-de-Vaud publia dans un prospectus trois volumes des *Lettres lausannoises*. Il annonçait les plus belles choses du monde, mais il voulait une souscription. "Quoi! dis-je, on me vole mon titre! Mais je préviendrai ce pédant audacieux." - Aussitôt je montai dans ma chambre et me dépêchai d'écrire. Huit ou dix jours après, les *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* étaient faites. *Caliste* ne fut écrite qu'assez longtemps après, c'est-à-dire un an peut-être. Entre deux, j'avais écrit *Mistriss Henley*.¹

It cannot be said that contemporary critics ignored 'Histoire de Cécile', the first part of the novel. French journals reproached the author for its looseness of style, and the critic of the *Journal de Paris* found not altogether to his taste "un certain goût de terroir", citing the use of the verb 'se dégonfler' to convey the colloquial sense of 'to get something off one's chest'.² In Switzerland two hostile pamphlets appeared. *Lettres écrites de Colombier, près de Neuchâtel. Pour servir de Supplément aux Lettres neuchâtelaises*, in fact directed against the first part of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, found the novelist's critical tone too great and objected in particular to the portrayal of those somewhat outside fashionable society, "cette classe inférieure à la bonne compagnie".³ The pamphlet was written in the first person, as if Isabelle de Charrière stood condemned out of her own mouth. Beneath the personal abuse and accusations of cynicism there is clearly a deeper recurring grievance: that Madame de Charrière should ever "prendre [ses] héroïnes dans une classe subalterne".⁴ The other hostile pamphlet, *Lettre écrite de la Cheneau-de-Bourg sur les Lettres de Lausanne et de Colombier* was slanted more against a woman writer daring to apply her intelligence to novel-writing. However there was one pamphlet, *Lettre d'un étranger à une dame de Lausanne, sur quelques nouveautés littéraires du pays*, which defended Isabelle de Charrière's novel for its relevance to the problems and character of the Swiss cantons. The pamphleteer praised it as a vindication of the "mœurs de la patrie" and also as "le miroir de nos faiblesses", and commended the novel's portrayal of those outside good society.

Contemporary readers of 'Histoire de Cécile' seem to have been concerned with social elements in the story, and a recent critic has also turned his attention to some of these aspects of the story.⁵ Professor Jean Starobinski, in an introductory essay to a new edition of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, has emphasized the particular social situation of Cécile and her mother and the state of their finances, and has linked this to a generalized narrative, affective, and material *dépendance*. The mother in the story is powerless to alter the events related, her

narrative position is passive; an emotional dependence is inherent in the mother-daughter relationship and in Cécile's love for Edouard, and material *dépendance* results from the family's financial situation. Certainly, as in *Lettres neuchâtelaises*, Isabelle de Charrière has taken much trouble to create a convincing background, full of realistic detail, and this detail does indeed affect the main course of the story. 'Histoire de Cécile' reveals something of an understanding of the economic structure of Swiss society. As in *Lettres neuchâtelaises* Isabelle de Charrière draws no conclusions, makes no dogmatic pronouncements, but throughout 'Histoire de Cécile' one senses the presence of Rousseau's thought when the novelist calls into question the values of upper-class and aristocratic society. (One is reminded of the well-known critique of luxury found in Rousseau's letters to the Maréchal de Luxembourg concerning the inhabitants of the Val-de-Travers, and published as recently as 1782.) The *moraliste* in Isabelle de Charrière is ready to examine the pressures on the virtuous in a society based, as she shows, on privilege and class prejudice and where money openly and covertly supports both of these. Whatever our final estimate of Isabelle de Charrière's position as a social critic, fashionable society appears in a relatively more sombre light than in *Lettres neuchâtelaises*. Personal heroism, honesty and integrity are clearly contrasted with a general vein of duplicity to be found in fashionable society.

This brings us to the central question about 'Histoire de Cécile': what kind of novel is it? Is it a novel of social realism, and if it is not, what purpose does the proliferation of background information serve? To answer this we must first of all understand that the background detail which Isabelle de Charrière provides is more than mere local colour. In Lausanne certain historical and social factors have been brought together in a unique combination at the end of the eighteenth century, and these are, directly or indirectly, the cause of many of Cécile's problems.⁶ Since the annexation of Lausanne and the Pays de Vaud by Berne in 1536 the region had gradually lost any autonomy in government that had been left to it. One major attempt at insurrection had been crushed and ended with the execution of Davel in 1723. The effective governing power in the Pays de Vaud was the Bernese Council of Two Hundred, a patrician group which ruled firmly but efficiently, and which had assured peace and stability for the region throughout the eighteenth century.

Although in the Pays de Vaud some of the bailiffs (representatives of Bernese authority) were Vaudois or of Vaudois extraction, a number of factors had conspired to produce what was almost an enforced indolence among the Vaudois aristocracy. Commerce was closed to the nobility, being considered socially degrading. The one honourable pursuit that could appeal to a young aristocrat was service in a foreign regiment. Failing this, there was only the path of scholarship, training to become a pastor. (There were no splendid bishoprics or abbeys to aspire to, as there were in France.) In consequence Lausanne became a seat of *désœuvrement* and parasitism as noblemen, discontented with the emptiness of life on their country estates, sold their property to rich foreign merchants and took up residence among the fashionable society of the city. Unable to earn money, the families of several aristocratic lines saw their fortunes decline from generation to generation. Largely excluded by the absolutism of Berne from any really constructive role in relation to Vaudois society as a whole, the aristocracy evolved a sophisticated and artificial way of life cut off from the more active sections of society.

In the society of Lausanne there existed three principal groups, each subdivided into coteries and exclusive cliques: that which was centred on the Rue de Bourg, for the aristocratic class; the Quartier de la Cité, for the educated upper middle-class élite of Protestant clergymen and professors at the Académie; and the Quartier du Pont for the commercial bourgeoisie. This

strict stratification, however, sometimes allowed a certain rather uneasy intermingling of the clergy with the aristocracy. Actual power over this city of seven thousand inhabitants lay in the hands of the Bailiff, who resided in the Castle. In spite of its lack of industry and the weak state of its commerce, Lausanne enjoyed a particularly elegant and cosmopolitan style of life on account of an influx of foreign visitors and capital. The price it paid was complete political docility.

Isabelle de Charrière's novel includes some of these factors in the network of constraints and pressures that act on Cécile and her mother. Cécile's mother is a widow in her late thirties, and her daughter is approaching marriageable age, being now seventeen. Cécile's mother is of Protestant *noblesse d'épée* lineage on her father's side and she had a mother who was a member of the bourgeoisie. She married a Vaudois aristocrat whose inheritance was small but sufficient. He has died, but her financial position for the moment remains secure. Cécile's mother, the narrator, relates (perhaps with some implausibility) all the events leading up to her present position. Her father had revived the failing family fortunes by taking a middle-class wife and earning himself a dowry, but had himself lost much of his own family's wealth to his four brothers in the division of his father's property. All this detail is clearly designed to show how important marriage and the dowry system have become as a means for the transmission of wealth. In the eyes of Cécile's mother it is essential for her daughter to marry well, and to marry within her caste if at all possible. She is the means by which a penurious Vaudois aristocrat might hope to repair his fortunes - and she has no real fortune. A man will therefore marry her not through acquisitiveness but through love. This economic detail brings out a duality of values in Cécile and her mother: both position *and* personal feelings must be safeguarded. The tensions in the novel grow as it becomes increasingly clear that Cécile will not succeed in reconciling these two factors. Various suitors with different qualities and prospects come forward, but it is Cécile's misfortune to fall in love, like Caliste, with the man who is socially ideal for her, but whose affection may not amount to love. The pathos is increased by her nearness to attaining this ideal for, as we later learn, Edouard's parents would be only too pleased to consent to their marriage.⁷ (There is perhaps an autobiographical echo in the many and varied suitors that appear as potential husbands for Cécile. In her youth Belle de Zuylen herself had been confronted by suitors she could not love and had been unable to marry those she could have loved.) Cécile has possible partners in the rather shadowy nobleman who reads only the Bible and the Gazette, in Lord Edouard, in the Bernese aristocrat nephew of the Bailiff, all of the noble class of Lausanne society. She has potential suitors from the 'educated' élite, Jeannot her second cousin and his robust friend from the Lac de Joux. And there are two members of the commercial bourgeoisie who might also qualify as possible suitors, one a gifted but idle drunkard, the other a colourless *négociant* unwilling to leave the Pays de Vaud to advance in his work. But Cécile's sufferings are only increased by having around her such a variety of suitors and potential suitors when she becomes increasingly aware that she can love only Edouard.

The social background of Lausanne also has a considerable bearing on the beliefs and aspirations of Cécile's mother, in particular her views on the nobility, which she views as embodying an ideal of public service. In Letter III we are given her design for a utopia under the traditional heading "Si j'étais roi". Her three-tier system would give pride of place to an hereditary aristocracy. This would be followed by a group of ennobled public servants who had served meritoriously in various fields, and then by life peers chosen by the people as their representatives. From these three groups would be drawn the King's advisers who would begin a new hereditary nobility. The class of all men would be that of their wives, as would the social class of their children, and this would ensure family stability and also greater

respect for marriageable young women. The next letter contrasts sharply with such an ideal state of affairs in its description of the present state of Lausanne society. In the opinion of Cécile's mother it has degenerated because of the introduction of foreign manners and behaviour, and because of a surplus of foreign money:

En vérité, pour ce monde, l'argent est bon à tout. Il achète jusqu'à la facilité de conserver des vertus dans le désordre, d'être vicieux avec le moins d'inconvénients possibles.⁸

Her utopian constitution of Letter III casts its shadow over Letter V, which focusses our attention on such problems as libertines seducing young girls,⁹ the need to rectify the inferior social position of women in marriage,¹⁰ the need to reinvigorate the nobility with men of energy,¹¹ and, to counter the possibility of a nobleman's *déclassement* by a bourgeois marriage, the desirability of rewarding service to the state with a peerage.

This is how things should be. But Cécile's mother knows the very great difficulties that face her daughter in the real world where no such utopian solutions are likely to prevail. Women are at a permanent disadvantage and are likely to be exploited in every way. Cécile in the eyes of society represents money as well as an agreeable personality. On the marriage market she is a commodity with a price and will probably pass to the highest bidder. It is this permanent disadvantage, this generalized *dépendance*, to use Professor Jean Starobinski's term, that functions as a besetting obstacle to Cécile's happiness. But as I said earlier the question remains whether the social circumstances of 'Histoire de Cécile' are, as seems generally to have been believed, its real centre of interest. I would suggest rather that Isabelle de Charrière's real achievement lies in her delicate realism, but a realism that is not so much social as psychological. Moods, tones and changes of register in relationships between highly sensitive and perceptive individuals are the areas in which Madame de Charrière is most successful. Her subtle colours are used to illustrate a central theme: how a fine and noble character gradually emerges onto the social scene from being a protected adolescent, and how she is liable to have her feelings bruised by the selfishness and self-seeking of society. Closely linked with this main theme is the developing relationship between Cécile and her mother, for the latter displays throughout the story varying degrees of protectiveness and clear-sightedness concerning her daughter's feelings. She knows that her daughter will no longer be sheltered from the wind, and that it can blow very sharply indeed. This is the twofold interest of the story: the delicacy of Isabelle de Charrière's style in evoking the shifts and nuances in complex human situations, and the exploration of a particularly close relationship between a mother and her daughter.

It would indeed be interesting to know whether Isabelle de Charrière was acquainted with Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1777) when she wrote the first part of *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, for its subtitle, 'The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World' and the kinds of experience it relates run parallel to Cécile's development in her novel.¹² Isabelle de Charrière lays before us the various stages in a young woman's discovery of herself in contact with fashionable society, and her growing awareness of the demands of prudence, patience and decorum. There is a significant difference, however, between the general tenor of 'Histoire de Cécile' and the experiences of Meyer in *Lettres neuchâtelaises*. For the moral positives of Cécile's story are centred more on the responsibility of the individual and less on conformity with the demands of a particular society. There is also a deeper tension within the central characters: they realize that society can be little more than a jungle of predatory egos, but also that it is the only place where Cécile is likely to find any fulfilment. Thus as regards society Isabelle de Charrière is as comprehensive in her view as ever. She understands the financial

pressures and pressures for conformity that hold fashionable society together, and more or less impartially shows us their effects on a maturing and sensitive individual.

As the story opens Cécile is emerging to face the trials of life in the public eye. Like Henri Meyer she is observed and judged by society. She cannot, however, be allowed any shortcomings or failings that would spoil her prospects of winning a suitable husband. Cécile's mother must make marriageability her daughter's chief concern. Yet pulling against this right from the beginning of the story is the need to be true to one's own sense of values, a factor which will increasingly force Cécile to turn her back on all mercenary considerations. From the beginning, Cécile's mother gives us certain clues as to the ideas involved in the conflict. She values character and principle as much as social presentability, and there is more than a hint of Rousseau in the way her pedagogical theory comes down so heavily on the side of experience and avoids pedantic knowledge.¹³ Nonetheless Cécile is taught reading and writing at a very young age, so that such necessary skills can easily become automatic to her. She is also taught other subjects and accomplishments which for various reasons her mother considers useful. Other education is left to Cécile's own leanings. Patience and resilience in suffering are learnt from example and experience, as when Cécile is impressed by her uncle's attitude during his final illness.¹⁴ Her mother considers it important too that Cécile should spend a short time in a village with a domestic servant of the family. The essential feature of her upbringing is her mother's desire to protect her from the excessive demands of contemporary education with its burden of learning and accomplishments, and, while developing her judgement, to fit her to be pleasing in good society. It is something of a compromise, and as such is symptomatic of an uneasiness about the social world of Lausanne. Cécile's mother wants above all naturalness for her daughter:

en vérité, elle est si jolie, si bonne, si naturelle, que je ne pense pas que personne voudût y rien changer.¹⁵

She wants something beyond social virtues like respectability or a sense of honour. She would seek to remedy society's artificiality and dislocation from a more natural way of life. Cécile's mother therefore undertakes to complete her daughter's education by guiding her through the reefs and shoals of adolescent meetings, aware that her daughter's urges must be held in abeyance, her innocence protected and her judgement developed. She recognizes above all the urgent need to wrest from Cécile an acknowledgement of the right course of action to pursue in all her dilemmas. The narrator would like to see her daughter's 'naturalness' unspoilt, but knows that for the present Cécile needs to acquire a mask of impassiveness, since people will take advantage of clues about her feelings presented by any emotional display. Her simple recipe for married happiness proves, in the event, impossible for her daughter, despite its apparent simplicity:

On se marie parce qu'on est un homme et une femme, et qu'on se plaît.¹⁶

The subtle delineation of a mother and daughter relationship is a rare thing in French fiction. In Isabelle de Charrière's story we enter into the heart of one particularly close relationship. Cécile and her mother often appear isolated, from correspondents, from unsympathetic relatives and on occasion (through the disparity between maturity and youth) from each other. By the end of the story we will have watched them moving into a deeper and richer relationship with each other.

From the beginning Cécile's mother displays an awareness of the variety of often contradictory qualities that an individual must have in order to be fully human. She sets herself firmly against all fashionable distinctions that pronounce certain qualities to be mutually exclusive. This early statement by the narrator suggesting that ethical textbooks do not take account of the complexity of real people prepares us for the exploration of her own complex personality and that of her daughter:

A l'occasion de ce mariage on parlera de vous, et l'on sentira ce qu'il y aurait à gagner pour la princesse qui attacherait à son service une femme de votre mérite, sage sans pruderie, modeste quoique remplie de talents. Mais voyons si cela est bien vrai. J'ai toujours trouvé que cette sorte de mérite n'existe que sur le papier, où les mots ne se battent jamais, quelque contradiction qu'il y ait entr'eux. Sage et point prude! Il est sûr que vous n'êtes point prude: je vous ai toujours vue fort sage; mais vous ai-je toujours vue? M'avez-vous fait l'histoire de tous les instants de votre vie? Une femme parfaitement sage serait prude; je le crois du moins. Mais passons là-dessus. Sincère et polie! Vous n'êtes pas aussi sincère qu'il serait possible de l'être, parce que vous êtes polie; ni parfaitement polie, parce que vous êtes sincère; et vous n'êtes l'un et l'autre à la fois, que parce que vous êtes médiocrement l'un et l'autre...¹⁷

She later returns to this problem to express her own comprehensive and compassionate realism about human complexity:

Revenons à vous, qui êtes aussi sincère et aussi polie qu'il est besoin de l'être; à vous, qui êtes charmante; à vous, que j'aime tendrement.¹⁸

It is the same objective but compassionate tone that Cécile's mother adopts when speaking of her growing daughter. Her directness seems to have shocked some contemporary readers, detailing Cécile's nosebleed, her hot flushes, her large eyes, her thick red lips and her enlarged neck. Gradually we come to understand the narrator's very personal sense of values, also epitomized in her use of forceful colloquial phrases like 'se dégonfler', 'où diantre', and a realistic bluntness:

Penser à elle! Quelle ridicule expression dans cette occasion-ci! (...) Vous voyez bien que, si on l'épouse, ce ne sera pas pour avoir pensé, mais pour l'avoir vue.¹⁹

Cécile's mother reveals herself to us as a character with as much individuality as her daughter. We glimpse an affectionate, enthusiastic woman, energetic and shrewd - in fact a personality not so far removed from Isabelle de Charrière herself. Perhaps at times she hovers on the brink of vulgarity, as when, for example, she refers to the son of the Bailiff of Lausanne:

C'est le fils de notre baillif, un beau jeune Bernois, couleur de rose et blanc, et le meilleur enfant du monde.²⁰

Such near-lapses from the perfectly urbane could be viewed as a further extension of Isabelle de Charrière's realism, for Cécile's mother may have inherited such rough-and-ready phrases - as well as her good sense - from her bourgeois mother. Such expressions are also something of a breath of oxygen in an otherwise suffocating atmosphere of masquerade and imposture. In her third letter Cécile's mother shows considerable penetration and foresight in outlining a social order that would eliminate many of the disadvantages which her daughter is to experience in the course of the story. Events will also lend pathos to her hopes:

Cécile n'est pas oubliée. Je suis partie d'elle; je reviens à elle. Je la suppose appartenant à la première classe; belle, bien élevée et bonne comme elle est, je vois à ses pieds tous les jeunes hommes de sa propre classe, qui ne voudraient pas déchoir, et ceux d'une classe inférieure, qui auraient l'ambition de s'élever.²¹

She has evaluated the whole range of suitors available for Cécile and has found no one outstandingly qualified. It is in the fourth letter that her problems really begin and her relationship with her daughter develops. Lord Edouard and his tutor William ask to be taken in as lodgers at Cécile's mother's house. Now earlier we learnt that Cécile's mother herself had underlined the superiority of the robust young Englishman to Cécile's cousin, a weak and spoiled young pastor. As her cousin is wrapping himself up warmly:

le jeune Anglais monte l'escalier quatre à quatre, revient comme un trait avec son chapeau, et offre la main à Cécile. Je ne pus m'empêcher de rire, et je dis au cousin qu'il pouvait se désemmailloter. Si auparavant son sort auprès de Cécile eût été douteux, ce moment le décidait.²²

By her words Cécile's mother has been to a certain extent responsible for attracting her daughter's admiration towards Edouard, and ironically she must now do her best to guide her daughter through the dangerous period of infatuation she has begun. When Edouard makes his request for lodgings she foresees her daughter's excitement, and acts swiftly to protect her from her own feelings:

Je refusai bien nettement, sans attendre que Cécile eût pu avoir une idée ou former un souhait.²³

Edouard has of late been particularly attentive and eager to please Cécile, and the narrator recognizes the advantages of this as well as its potential dangers. But she must hurt Cécile in the short term in the hope both of keeping Edouard's interest *and* of preserving Cécile's reputation in the long term. For the long term is the only scale on which Cécile ought to consider anything, though her feelings may be demanding more immediate satisfaction. A short-term affair would ruin her. This tension between their two attitudes to experience brings about a moment of deep mutual understanding and sympathy:

Je regardai Cécile; elle avait les yeux fixés sur moi. Je vis bien qu'il fallait refuser; mais en vérité je souffris presque autant que je faisais souffrir [...] Cécile est venue m'embrasser. Vous me remerciez, lui ai-je dit. Elle a rougi: je l'ai tendrement embrassée. Des larmes ont coulés de mes yeux. Elle les a vues, et je suis sûre qu'elle y a lu une exhortation à être sage et prudente, plus persuasive que n'aurait été le plus éloquent discours.²⁴

Each hurts the other by her attitude, the mother by the overarching range of her concern for her daughter's future, Cécile by an urgent but myopic concern with the present. But their love for each other adds an extra dimension of suffering, each being hurt by causing the other distress. This second and more selfless dimension of feeling will develop into a new emotional bond between them by the end of the story. Already in the same letter, Letter IV, Cécile comes to her mother's defence against the short-sighted mercenary outlook of her uncle. She can defend an action she almost certainly regrets her mother taking, and shows considerable will and moral strength in so doing. It is interesting to note, after this crucial first dilemma, that Cécile's mother very typically ranges wider into the general social situation in Lausanne and, almost without seeming to, situates Cécile's predicament more exactly.

Cécile's mother reveals that she is not naïve enough to disregard money as a factor in marriage, but in her hierarchy of values such pragmatism comes well below love.

Here we have the situation summed up in the narrator's words:

Je l'aime uniquement: cela rend bien clairvoyante et bien attentive.²⁵

But all the protectiveness and lucidity of Cécile's mother are now called upon to deal with the central problem of the story, one which makes it something of a parallel to *Caliste*. Edouard comes into increasing prominence, and will pose the same kind of problems for her as William sets the reader of *Caliste*. For it is extremely difficult for her to know what Edouard is thinking and to penetrate the mystery surrounding his feelings. She obviously hopes that he loves Cécile, and she must watch while her daughter builds castles in the air. But the body of evidence is slim indeed. It would not be true to say that Edouard is *indifferent* to Cécile, for he certainly pays her plenty of attention. The question is *whether Edouard harbours matrimonial intentions*, and it is *this* that Cécile's mother desperately tries to find out. As a personality the reader rapidly comes to see Edouard as little more than a stock figure, coloured in with stock details. With his horse, riding crop, smart clothes and boots he belongs to the second wave of *anglomanie* that struck France at about this time. (The first wave of *anglomanie* had concerned ideas; the second wave, as Parisian journals of the time eloquently attest, concerned English fashions and English novels.) Edouard represents superficiality in every respect, as we come to realize in the end, but for Cécile and her mother the marriage question is of the utmost gravity since Cécile is unable to control her infatuation with him.

What is to be done, since it is Cécile's happiness that hangs in the balance? Her mother can only love and advise her. Although she does on occasion take decisive action, the narrator's role is generally confined to observation and post-mortems on Cécile's encounters:

Elle ne me dit rien; mais je la vois contente ou rêveuse, selon qu'elle le voit ou ne le voit pas, selon que ses préférences sont plus ou moins marquées.²⁶

But her observations are *felt* ones and draw us into close sympathy with the indulgent mother who smiles at her daughter's grammatical errors and with her lapse into pragmatism on the matter of William's visits:

Faut-il le renvoyer? Ne m'est-il pas permis, en lui laissant voir ce que sont du matin au soir la fille et la mère, de l'engager à favoriser un établissement agréable et brillant pour ma fille, de l'obliger à dire du bien de nous au père et à la mère du jeune homme? Faut-il que j'écarte ce qui pourrait donner à Cécile l'homme qui lui plaît? Je ne veux pas dire encore l'homme qu'elle aime. Elle aura bientôt dix-huit ans. La nature peut-être plus que le cœur...²⁷

As an shrewd and mature observer she can see not only further than Cécile but also than Edouard. However such foresight and such an aphoristic understanding of human nature as this can only increase her suffering:

Il ne voit pas combien il est peu à craindre qu'elle s'ennuie [avec lui]. On parle tant des illusions de l'amour-propre; cependant il est bien rare, quand on est véritablement aimée, qu'on croie l'être autant qu'on l'est. Un enfant ne voit pas combien il occupe continuellement sa mère. Un amant ne voit pas que sa maîtresse ne voit et n'entend partout que lui.²⁸

Soon she is to witness the rebuffs that Cécile receives at the hands of society, and to be made more anxious and fearful than Cécile yet realizes. For when Cécile returns home silent and withdrawn after what her mother later sees as a relatively minor incident (Edouard's flirtation with another woman), her mother immediately fears the worst:

Il arriva l'autre jour une chose qui me donna beaucoup d'émotion et d'alarme [...] Cécile est revenue d'une visite qu'elle avait faite, pâle comme la mort. J'ai été très effrayée. Je lui ai demandé ce qu'elle avait, ce qui lui était arrivé [...Elle] s'est mise à pleurer, à sangloter, pour mieux dire. Je l'ai embrassée, je l'ai caressée, nous lui avons donné à boire: ses larmes coulaient toujours.²⁹

It is this kind of intense emotional atmosphere that Isabelle de Charrière is so successful in producing, through short sentences, pauses and eloquent gestures, and this technique focusses our feelings upon the narrator as much as on Cécile herself. In the event the incident, though unimportant in its causes, takes us to the heart of the mother-daughter relationship. Cécile's magnification of what to the mature mind are trivia unwittingly causes their two attitudes to life, the immediate and short-term, and the long-term, to come distressingly into friction. As Cécile's situation becomes more serious, her mother's love and concern for her daughter leads her to risk embarrassment and ridicule. When society places Cécile in a difficult position, or when she is in danger of losing control of her emotions with Edouard, her mother steps in to defend her or to ward off the danger. Cécile is naïve enough to state that a visiting Frenchwoman is wearing a false hair-piece. This is taken by the men in the company as an amusing instance of feminine spite, and she is teased for it. Amid the salon witticisms her mother breaks in to clear Cécile of the charge:

Si ma fille avait quelques années de plus, elle se serait tue; à son âge, et quand on a sur sa tête une véritable forêt, il est assez naturel de parler.³⁰

The change of tone to a stern respect for the truth gives the reader the same prickly embarrassment as Cécile:

Cécile, embarrassée, souriait et pleurait en même temps.³¹

Once again we are drawn into sympathy with the two characters. Is her mother being more protective than befits Cécile's years? Should she allow her to suffer and learn by fighting her own battles? This is the kind of question that is actually dramatized before us. For Cécile love and understanding increasingly take the place of any resentment that she might have felt as regards her mother's behaviour. Afterwards she can say to her:

Bonsoir, ma mère et ma protectrice (...) bonsoir, mon Don Quichotte.³²

Cécile not only understands but can also feel with her mother enough to smile at her. Her mother enters into the complicity:

J'ai ri. Cécile se forme et devient tous les jours plus aimable.³³

Whatever the results of her mother's intervention, Cécile cannot be protected from herself or others all the time. To her mother's dismay, she lets slip an opportunity to inflict a salutary humiliation on Edouard. As an onlooker her mother is powerless to tip the balance in her favour:

au lieu de se moquer de lui, comme il l'aurait mérité, elle m'en parut bien aise. Heureuse de faire une impression favorable sur son amant, elle en aimait la cause quelle qu'elle fût.³⁴

Cécile lives in Protestant Lausanne, an additional difficulty for her mother, though one she would not willingly change. Her daughter is free within reason to associate with young men, and cannot be kept under strict surveillance. But the important occasion when Cécile does begin to lose her composure is fortuitously witnessed by her mother, and provides her with an opportunity to deepen her relationship with Cécile. Her daughter falls into an infatuated trance while playing chess with Edouard, and is interrupted by her before anything truly irreparable can be said or done. This minor crisis provides Cécile's mother with an opportunity of taking her afterwards through what is almost a catechism class in womanly and wifely morality. She attempts, in reply to Cécile's surprised questions, to reconcile her daughter with patience and chastity. She restates the dangers of self-indulgence:

Les filles peu sages plaisent encore plus que les autres; mais il est rare que le délire aille jusqu'à les épouser: encore plus rare qu'après les avoir épousées, un repentir humiliant ne les punisse pas d'avoir été trop séduisantes.³⁵

Cécile would surely give in to her feelings if her mother were not prepared to guide her. As it is, her mother uses their growing trust and mutual understanding to instil in her daughter some of her own immense will-power. She builds on their love in order to elicit an act of faith from her daughter. The danger is laid before her:

L'habitude de la faiblesse sera prise, le devoir et la pudeur sont déjà accoutumés à céder.³⁶

Cécile must accept her role as a respectable woman, however hard the task. Through love for her mother she does so:

Je n'ai pas tout compris, mais les paroles sont gravées dans ma tête.³⁷

It is this love for her mother which will eventually extend her sympathies and strengthen her principles, and will in part compensate her for the bitterness of not winning Edouard's love. But before this final loss there comes the crisis with M de ***'s dangerous deception, and the triumph of her mother's advice in Cécile. For Cécile surpasses her mother in prudence as well as in feeling and compassion. On what is now her own initiative she, like Caliste, sets a test for Edouard by arranging to go out more and mix with the fashionable society of Lausanne. Her test, like that of Caliste, produces little evidence of deep feelings on Edouard's part, and yet even in defeat she keeps hoping. She has achieved mature judgement in all other matters, and stands firm on the high ground of principle in this, largely through her mother's influence:

Je me trouve (...) de la fermeté, et j'ai une envie si grande de ne pas vous donner des chagrins!³⁸

Her mother entirely approves of her daughter's behaviour, but is not unaware of the cost:

Ma fille perd sa gaieté dans la contrainte qu'elle s'impose.³

Their conversations have taken on an increasingly intimate tone, so that in the closing stages of the story they are rendered almost equal in maturity, sensitivity and suffering. Now the

mother asks her daughter questions, about her feelings for an agreeable Bernese gentleman, and gradually the discussion grows in emotional closeness. On this delicate marriage question even the conventional barriers of speech are broken when her mother slips into uncharacteristic *tutoiement*. Although Cécile recognizes the total superiority of the gentleman from Berne, she will never be able to love him with anything like the intensity of her love for Edouard. It is as if she is bereaved and alone - just like her widowed mother. Adversity has so strengthened their love for each other that Cécile contemplates the idea of a spinster's life with less revulsion:

si vous trouviez bon que nous allussions en Hollande ou en Angleterre tenir une boutique ou établir une pension, je crois qu'étant toujours avec vous et occupée, et n'ayant pas le temps d'aller dans le monde ni de lire des romans, je ne convoiterais et ne regretterais rien, et que ma vie pourrait être très douce.⁴⁰

However her mother's experienced voice realistically reminds her that death will separate them sooner than Cécile thinks. There is a world of suggestiveness in the narrator's comment on their long silence:

Nos paroles ont fini là, mais non pas nos pensées.⁴¹

Their tenderness and sadness are both increased by this realization. But Cécile has the courage to hold to her love for her mother even at the very moment of defeat, when they announce their departure from Lausanne:

que j'en aie tout le plaisir ou tout le chagrin. A vos côtés, appuyée contre votre chaise, touchant votre bras, ou seulement votre robe, je me sentirai forte de la plus puissante comme de la plus aimable protection. Vous savez bien, maman, combien vous m'aimez, mais non pas combien je vous aime, et que vous ayant, vous, je pourrais supporter de tout perdre, et renoncer à tout. Allons, maman, vous êtes trop poltronne, et vous me croyez bien plus faible que je ne suis.⁴²

In the section of the story which overlaps into *Caliste*, the situation becomes so poignant for her mother that quite unexpectedly she weeps when informing William and M. de *** of her intention of leaving Lausanne.⁴³ But she finds consolation in Cécile's fine and compassionate character which opens itself to the afflicted, in the shape of a dying black man and an abandoned and starving dog. Her comment on this epitomizes her own relationship with Cécile:

Au lieu de raisonner, au lieu de moraliser, donnez à aimer à quelqu'un qui aime; si aimer fait son danger, aimer sera sa sauvegarde; si aimer fait son malheur, aimer sera sa consolation: pour qui sait aimer, c'est la seule occupation, la seule distraction, le seul plaisir de la vie.⁴⁴

Let us now turn to the novel's second focus of concern, the development of Cécile as she moves out from the calm and unruffled anchorage of her protected adolescence into the troubled waters of womanhood. She has, as we know, been brought up in such a way that moral principles and judgement will take root in her heart as a result of her own experience. We remember the influence of Rousseau in her mother's strictures against 'se laisser moraliser'.⁴⁵ Now one of the central problems facing Cécile, in whom everything tends towards 'le naturel' in the broadest sense, is the essential gulf between what people appear to

say and do and their real feelings. All social life demands a degree of insincerity, as her mother is well aware; we recall her observation on her correspondent:

Sincère et polie! Vous n'êtes pas aussi sincère qu'il serait possible de l'être, parce que vous êtes polie; ni parfaitement polie, parce que vous êtes sincère; et vous n'êtes l'un et l'autre à la fois, que parce que vous êtes médiocrement l'un et l'autre.⁴⁶

But the distance between appearance and reality is infinitely variable depending on social circumstances. It also depends on degrees of self-seeking and wilful deception, of vanity and empty show in individuals. Cécile must learn to hide her stronger emotions for several very good reasons. First, society demands a measure of decorum in her behaviour. Second, although she has no first-hand experience of it, there are men and women in fashionable society who will take advantage of such feelings. The third reason is linked to the second and first: no husband would want an obviously hyper-sensitive wife for fear of losing her to another man, and, human nature being what it is, a man would be reluctant to marry a woman who made courtship too easy. But hiding one's feelings is an art that has to be learned. Cécile can momentarily regain Edouard's interest by a show of complete indifference after he has hovered around a Parisian lady,⁴⁷ but she fails to realize that any criticism of the woman in mixed company will draw knowing smiles and sarcasm.⁴⁸ Also the object of her criticism, the question of the woman's false hair-piece, is in a way symbolic of the necessary deceptions which society practises and which are best left without comment. One could class with the hair-piece another symbol of the artificiality and theatricality of society with which Cécile must arrive at some *modus vivendi*, namely Madame de ***. Of her Cécile's mother says:

Madame voudrait être de tout, briller, plaire, jouer un rôle.⁴⁹

This pattern of alternating success and failure in dissimulation occurs once again in Letter X. Cécile can see that William loves her mother, by reason of her special relationship with her and her increasing powers of discernment. However, she is unable to see M. de ***'s love for herself, and continues to be dangerously blind to it. Nor can Cécile cover her embarrassment when Edouard suggests during a party game that she is in love:

Cécile rougit comme jamais elle n'avait rougi.⁵⁰

She needs and receives from her perceptive and sympathetic mother the kind of verbal diversion that can protect her from damaging gossip. Indeed Cécile must come to learn that good society lives in and through its words and conversations, and to understand that in the salon's verbal skirmishes she needs to be able to parry awkward and probing questions. Such a military frame of reference also seems to fit the almost emblematic confrontations between Edouard and Cécile across a chess or draughts board. Like the games themselves there are the regulated moves, the face-to-face contest, the manoeuvres which must be concealed under the very eyes of one's opponent. Her mother's is uneasy from the first about such meetings:

On commençait à les faire jouer ensemble partout où ils se rencontraient.⁵¹

for Edouard has the opportunity of scoring a decisive emotional victory over the impressionable Cécile. The game progresses in seriousness in the eyes of all, as do Cécile's feelings for Edouard. Cécile's restraint cannot hold out. At one point, while being taught chess moves, Cécile becomes overwrought and quarrels with Edouard. This leads to one trance-like and ecstatic moment of silence between them as, significantly, Cécile tries to re-set

a toppled pawn. She is only saved by her mother's intervention. Of course her mother, as we have seen, is in an unenviable position. She cannot forbid such a superficially harmless pastime; all the pressure of society would probably be turned against her if she did, as well as its suspicions. She has little room for manoeuvre, but takes the one effective course she can with her daughter, that of building a defence out of their mutual trust. She urges Cécile to uphold the Christian principles she has reared her in, and to cultivate in society the appearance of indifference and impassiveness. Again the pattern of success and failure sets in. Cécile can deceive Edouard into believing the chess-board incident is forgotten, albeit with some reluctance as she confides to her mother:

Je l'ai trompé, cela n'est pourtant pas bien agréable à faire.⁵²

Edouard's confidence received a jolt. But Cécile fails disastrously to foresee the behaviour of M. de ***, who cuts his finger with a penknife, pretends to faint, then kisses Cécile when she leans over him.⁵³ What can a mother do when her own relative, a married man, can stoop to such deceitful behaviour? Although Cécile recovers her poise, can we now be sure that all will finally be well? A further degree of verisimilitude lies in the very real love that M. de *** feels for Cécile. He is no Lovelace. As her mother has said earlier:

les vicieux déterminés, les véritables méchants sont aussi rares que les hommes parfaits et les femmes parfaites. On ne voit guère tout cela que dans des fictions mal imaginées.⁵⁴

(In fact M. de *** becomes an object of pity by the end of the story.) Cécile, growing in wisdom and moral stature, now takes the initiative of resuming social visiting in order to assess Edouard's feelings for her. She has conquered her tendency to display her feelings. But society can offer no reward. Where the story breaks off, Cécile has no proof of Edouard's loving her. Her only reward is in being fully herself, in having lived out the highest ideal of herself before her mother's eyes. It is the kind of conclusion which, I believe, wins our assent. Indeed one might argue that Isabelle de Charrière is at her most successful as a novelist when dealing with this kind of quiet domestic tragedy.

¹ *Lettres écrites de Lausanne: Histoire de Cécile. Caliste* par Mme de Charrière avec une préface de Philippe Godet (Geneva, 1907), vi-vii. (Hereafter referred to as *L.L.*, followed by page number.)

² Godet I, 312.

³ Godet I, 314.

⁴ Godet I, 315.

⁵ *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse. Lettres écrites de Lausanne*. Présentation de Jean Starobinski (Lausanne, 1970), 43-66, reproduced with some modifications in *Roman et Lumières au 18e siècle* (Paris, 1970) as 'Les Lettres écrites de Lausanne par Mme de Charrière: inhibition psychique et interdit social'.

⁶ On the social circumstances that inform 'Histoire de Cécile', see Charles Burnier, *La Vie vaudoise et la Révolution. De la servitude à la liberté* (Lausanne, 1902).

⁷ *L.L.*, 122.

⁸ *L.L.*, 23.

⁹ *L.L.*, 25.

¹⁰ *L.L.*, 26.

¹¹ *L.L.*, 26.

¹² Such an acquaintance would seem quite possible. We know that she read *Camilla* (though she did not approve of it) from an unpublished letter to Madame Huber of 20 July 1798. (In the collection of Madame Chaponnière of Geneva, copy communicated to me by Professor Charly Guyot.)

¹³ *L.L.*, 29.

¹⁴ *L.L.*, 30

¹⁵ *L.L.*, 29. The attitude of Cécile's mother towards botany, 'Je considère la nature en amant; ils [les chimistes] l'étudient en anatomistes' (*L.L.*, 39), is a further echo of Rousseau in her thinking. One recalls the *Rêveries* where Rousseau contrasts his own approach to nature with that of botanists who collect flowers only to distil them into drugs and medicines (*Rêveries*, ed. Roddier (Paris, 1960), 91-4.) Similarly her mystical sense of the presence of God in the midst of natural beauty (*L.L.*, 100) is strongly reminiscent of Rousseau.

¹⁶ *L.L.*, 8.

¹⁷ *L.L.*, 2.

¹⁸ *L.L.*, 3.

¹⁹ *L.L.*, 4-5.

²⁰ *L.L.*, 33. Such homely artlessness is felt in her comment on her daughter, 'C'est une belle et bonne fille que ma fille' (*L.L.*, 6).

²¹ *L.L.*, 16.

²² *L.L.*, II.

²³ *L.L.*, 19.

²⁴ *L.L.*, 19-20.

²⁵ *L.L.*, 28.

²⁶ *L.L.*, 36-7.

²⁷ *L.L.*, 39.

²⁸ *L.L.*, 37.

- ²⁹ *L.L.*, 40.
- ³⁰ *L.L.*, 46.
- ³¹ *L.L.*, 46.
- ³² *L.L.*, 47.
- ³³ *L.L.*, 47.
- ³⁴ *L.L.*, 53.
- ³⁵ *L.L.*, 62.
- ³⁶ *L.L.*, 64.
- ³⁷ *L.L.*, 70.
- ³⁸ *L.L.*, 83.
- ³⁹ *L.L.*, 101.
- ⁴⁰ *L.L.*, 98.
- ⁴¹ *L.L.*, 99.
- ⁴² *L.L.*, 108-9.
- ⁴³ *L.L.*, 110.
- ⁴⁴ *L.L.*, 116.
- ⁴⁵ *L.L.*, 3.
- ⁴⁶ *L.L.*, 2.
- ⁴⁷ *L.L.*, 45.
- ⁴⁸ *L.L.*, 45.
- ⁴⁹ *L.L.*, 49.
- ⁵⁰ *L.L.*, 51.
- ⁵¹ *L.L.*, 37.
- ⁵² *L.L.*, 69.
- ⁵³ *L.L.*, 75-6.

⁵⁴ *L.L.*, 60.